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ABSTRACT

In this individualized reading program, informal diagnosis through instructor-student conferences leads to an individual prescription, which is based on standardized test scores. Additional program components include an informal reading inventory, student's statements of goals, student's interests, student's other courses, amount of time available considering work and family demands, and visual screening. A prescription sheet is filed for each student. A student selects reading materials and/or reading machines and vocabulary words and then works through the individual prescription at his or her own pace. Class sessions for group interaction are conducted. In combining self-pacing with other approaches in a writing program, it is important to use the student's own writing as the basis of the learning module, the module being designed to help the student revise his or her own papers, line by line, and process by process. A student continues on through the pattern of writing, conferring, and revising via the learning packets until the desired grade level has been achieved on the required number of performance sheets. (LL)

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Self-Pacing in Reading and Writing Programs: What Does the Future Hold?

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Self-pacing, an increasingly popular approach to teaching, is based on the organization of material into modules, each presenting specific behavioral objectives, some exercises and activities, and criteria, which are set to determine the successful completion of the module (9).

Time factors constitute the chief advantage of self-pacing. The students may enter and finish the course at their own pace, perhaps long before other students. They may pre-test out of some modules, and they may repeat any lesson at will. Instructional time can also be saved, because the major part of the teaching task is done by the module.

Another advantage is that the modules give the students some control over the learning task because they know exactly what kind of work is expected, how much is expected, and what the criteria are for various levels of success. Provisions can also be made for individual learning styles. For example, students may use a taped program or a written exercise, depending on their preferred learning styles.

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Self-paced systems, however, sometimes involve factors which are not particularly helpful to students.

Self-pacing, for example, does not diagnose individual strengths and weaknesses, nor is it based on individualized prescriptions. Although the student works "individually," the same course material is prepared for all. If there is a "diagnostic" test, it often points out general areas of weakness but not reasons for the problems.

Another negative factor is that material presented modularly must often be fragmented so that specific behavioral objectives and exact evaluation criteria can be included in each module. Devising specific criteria to measure the student's ability to synthesize, react to, enjoy, or use what he has learned is so difficult that it is often easier to concentrate on measuring the fragmented skills. Thus, the student must often learn from modules presenting many separate but carefully measured skills which he may never be able to correlate.

As far back as 1941, researchers were questioning the advisability of measuring finely differentiated skills in reading. See works by Frederick B. Davis, 1941 (3); Lyman C. Hunt, 1952 (6); and Roger T. Lennon, 1962 (7).

We also need to be aware of the regression effect (2). This is the phenomena which causes us to question the post-test scores of almost all students on the upper and lower ends of the scale on standardized post-tests which attempt to measure progress since the pre-test. If progress post-tests are to be a part of a self-paced program, we need to be aware of this possible distortion.

Another advantage lost to the student in a self-paced program is the

opportunity to interact with other people. Often, in traditional classes, a supportive psyche develops from group interaction. Although some students are motivated by programed learning, others cannot cope with the lack of human contact which often accompanies learning module programs.

The student also needs human contact with the instructor to allow for informal diagnosis and realistic pacing of instruction. Only by face-to-face contact can the instructor learn about personal factors that affect the student and his learning potential. We must also consider the opportunities for feedback which are open to the teacher. Unless the program calls for teacher-student interaction, many students will neglect to bother the teacher, causing him to question his function within the program.

In order to avoid some of the negative factors in a self-paced program, we recommend a combination of the best of self-pacing, true individualization, and group interaction. Because of the pressures to self-pace from the administrative superstructure or from the effects of overcrowding or staggered admissions policies, it is probably unrealistic to say that self-pacing will disappear from two- and four-year colleges.

The question is, how do we go about creating a meaningful self-paced program in communication skills? Our main goal is not merely to produce a proficient reader or writer, but to produce someone who does indeed read, whose reading makes a difference in his life, and who can write about what he knows.

Self-Pacing in a Reading Program

In our reading program, the individualized facet consists of the

following components: Through instructor-student conferences, informal diagnosis leads to an individual prescription, which is based on standardized test scores (10); informal reading inventory; student's statements of goals; student's interests; student's other courses; amount of time available considering work and family demands; and visual screening (telebinocular and reading eye camera when required). A prescription sheet is filed in the student's folder in the reading lab; as perceived goals and interests change, the prescription is revised. Individualization includes self-selection of reading materials and/or reading machines and vocabulary words.

This is no less self-paced than a packet approach, because the student works through his individual prescription at his own pace and records his own progress.

Meanwhile, students attend class sessions for group interaction. Group activities include uninterrupted sustained silent reading (8); discussions of the reading process, i.e. making a prediction about the material and then reading to confirm that prediction (4); reading and discussing ideas in paragraphs, essays, and textbooks; relating to content areas and real-life situations; and making vocabulary study useful.

A typical lesson may proceed as follows: The concepts of main ideas, paragraph development, and interaction with the author's thoughts are introduced in the group session, through presentation of a variety of materials. Students then compose paragraphs of their own for analysis of main ideas and patterns of development and reasoning. Because students use their own ideas and language, reading skills become more relevant.

Self-pacing occurs in the reading lab when the student practices the paragraph skills using materials he selects and then decides when he is ready to take a performance test. This leads to re-grouping for further instruction and practice or to the introduction of a new skill. The student meets with the instructor again in an individual conference to determine how to proceed.

Self-Pacing in a Writing Program

How can self-pacing be combined with other approaches in a writing program? One of the most important considerations is that we use the student's own writing material as the basis of the learning module. This is a key point because it helps us avoid the frequent lack of transfer experienced by students who do grammar exercises based on someone else's sentences or someone else's grammar.

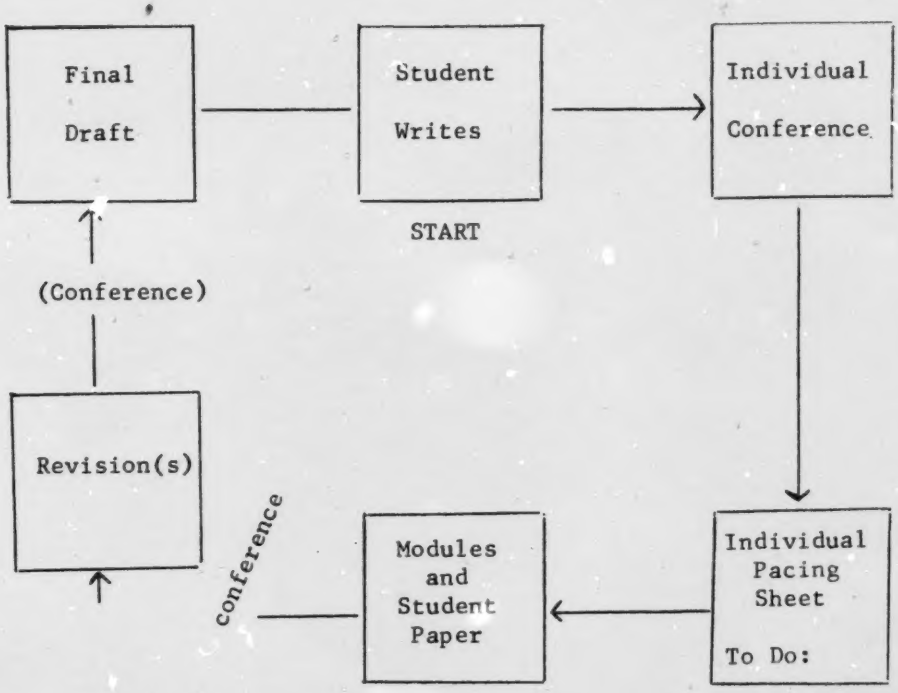
As we contemplate the designing of a composition module, we should carefully consider what we are trying to produce--a skilled writer--one who can compose mature and readable sentences full of information. If we are to avoid the super-fragmentation which we have already observed as the result of some learning packet and programed book situations, we should concentrate on the larger skills--such as writing mature sentences--and allow the minuscule skills such as comma usage to stay in their proper perspective.

This is not to advocate ignoring the polite writing conventions. To be sure, future employers will rate our students on their ability to handle spelling and standard verb endings. But, we would avoid forcing the student to think of these items as ends in themselves. We need to impress

upon the student that the main purpose of writing well is to communicate well; only secondary is the social purpose of writing with the accepted conventions.

In short, the student who is working on a self-paced program using his own writing as the basis of any work may not produce as correct a composition as the student who has drilled on grammar rules, but he will produce a more mature paper in terms of embedding efficient sentences (5), providing details, and eliminating deadwood.

Here is a sample of a combination of the self-paced concept and the individualized concept integrated into a single program:



Again, the guiding principle is the use of the student's own composition. All students must start there. Ideally, the student may already be working on an essay or report for another class. This can be the paper he uses as his initial composition. If he is not writing anything for another class, he can start a composition of his own, following module #1 of the series.

After this initial effort at composition, the student brings his work and his module to the instructor for a conference. At this point, the instructor examines the paper, noting verbally to the student his strengths and weaknesses. From this interaction between the instructor and student comes the diagnosis, which is written by the instructor on the pacing sheet. This sheet tells the student what modules he needs to apply to his paper as he starts to rewrite it into a final draft. This step replaces the usual pre-test; it can allow the student to omit some of the prepared packets. By providing personal contact, the conference may also allow the teacher to discover <u>why</u> some of the weaknesses appear in the student's paper. After the sheet is filled out, the student will know exactly how many modules he must complete and can pace himself accordingly.

After the conference, the student goes to the program modules and selects one to work on. He must remember to take his composition because the modules are designed to help the student revise his own paper, line by line, and process by process. For example, some of the packets involve xeroxing the initial paper, cutting the sentences apart, and pasting them in the exercise pages of the packet for subject-verb analysis. <u>The Whole Thing</u>, by Janet Stearn Abbott (1), offers many workable techniques which

make use of the student's own composition as exercise material. Most important, using this approach helps to eliminate the nagging problem of lack of transfer of English skills from exercise material to the student's next composition because the practice material is an original composition.

The last module a student works through directs him to re-assemble his revised sentences and prepare a new draft, which he brings to his instructor at another conference. If the revision is acceptable and incorporates the principles and practices of the modules assigned, the instructor fills out a performance sheet, noting the levels of performance achieved by the student for each module. This step substitutes for the post- or progress test and provides an objective measurement of the student's mastery.

If the draft reveals weaknesses noted in the first conference, the student can be directed to an alternate module, or if the draft shows new weaknesses, the student can be directed to another module and asked to do one more revision.

So the student continues on through the pattern of writing, conferring, and revising via the learning packets until he has achieved his desired grade level on the required number of performance sheets.

Although this paper presents only a few of the many strategies we have tried, it is evident that the most promising future use of self-pacing must involve integration with group support and true individualization in order to produce the person skilled in reading and writing.

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